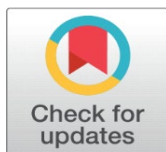
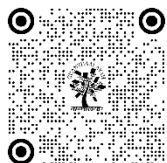


THE 'ORDINARY' MEN: AN ANALYSIS OF MASCULINE REPRESENTATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYALAM CINEMA

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Received 01 April 2023
Accepted 29 July 2023
Published 03 August 2023

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DOI
[10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i1SE.2023.427](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i1SE.2023.427)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

Power packed performances of the male lead with the goons flying in the air has become a mundane visual treat for the Malayali audience. It is those heroes with the 'guy next to door' image that the audience feels acceptable and relatable. Malayalam film industry, popularly known as Mollywood, witnessed in the year 2022 the release of a couple of brilliant films notable for their scrupulous character portrayals. Such characters narrated and detailed the lives and ways of common men and thus were critically acclaimed post release, as noticeable entries in contemporary popular culture. Culture demands and conditions men and women to act out their gender roles in specific ways, which in turn, put pressures on them to live up to the expectations of the societal and cultural standards. The paper intends to focus on these aspects by analyzing three Malayalam films – *Puzhu*, *Malayankunju*, and *Nna Thaana Case Kodu*, all released in the year 2022. All these three movies have different plot settings and character sketches, but are unique in respect of the portrayal of male protagonists in them. According to Raewyn Connell's categorization of masculinities, each of the male characters in the film identified belongs to hegemonic, marginalized, and sub-ordinate masculine categories. The main focus of the paper is to analyze the ideologies of masculine representations in the popular media and thereby to point out the cultural nuances in these portrayals.

Keywords: Masculinity Studies, Raewyn Connell's Hierarchy of Masculinity, Identification, Hegemony, Ideology, Popular Culture

1. INTRODUCTION

"Cinema is a matter of what's in the frame and what's out", says Martin Scorsese. These famous words of the American film maker provide an unambiguous statement regarding cinema. Films, despite its language, is historically known for the entertainment value it provides. Other than this as [Lebeau \(2001\)](#) argues, there exists a 'correspondence between the cinema, and the unconscious mind', both in terms of 'how and what the mind thinks' (6). It is in this context that the current

changes in Malayalam film industry with respect to its character depiction becomes the point of discussion. Back in the twentieth century, the on-screen depiction of men with superhuman qualities was a much-appreciated element in the south Indian film industry. As times changed one could see a change of preference in the spectator. Characters with normal human flaws started gaining more acceptance than the hero with the far-fetched traits. Some of the films that were released in the past one year itself are absolute examples for this. For the current analysis, three films, all released in the year 2022 namely *Puzhu*, *Malayankunju* and *Nna Thaan Case Kodu* have been taken. In these films one could see a male who is both a dominating brother as well as a father, a subordinated male who vents out his emotions and weaknesses and a marginalized man who tries to exert his own space and personal rights through struggles respectively. [Narayanan \(2022\)](#)

In the process of becoming a man, every boy experiences a wound that is mostly given to him by his father and goes undiscussed [Eldredge \(2001\)](#) The author here throws light on a significant yet unexplored issue concerning masculinity. Though Elderidge accounts the role of male parent as having the lion's share in the formation of a male psyche and temperament, present-day discourses often bring in more contributing factors for the same. Sheila Jeffreys in the book *Unpacking Queer Politics* says that "the form taken by the male dominant behaviour, masculinity, can vary considerably, and is influenced by class, race and many other factors." [Jeffreys \(2003\), p.7.](#)

The film *Puzhu* (2022) deals with the life of an uppercaste man and a high-ranking officer named Kuttan who lives with his only son in an apartment. His dominance and authoritative methods of bringing up his son often suffocates the latter. The disgust and annoyance he feel with almost everyone around him is accentuated when his only sister and her husband move to the same apartment in which he lives. The reason for his deep animosity is his sister's elopement with this man, who in turn belongs to a much lower class. Kuttan's troublesome nature strains his relationship with everyone associated with him; for he more or less wants to deploy things in his own way. Kuttan's abhorrence and chauvinism results in releasing his rage and becoming insane. The movie had the lead actor Mamooty in a negative role and his performance was much acclaimed by the audience and critics alike. [Poduval \(2022\)](#)

The next visual text that is taken for analysis is *Malayankunju* (2022). Here one could perceive a protagonist who lives out his life, trying to be occupied. But the series of events in the film shows that his supposedly engaging life is nothing but an escape from the unaddressed traumas of his life. The film talks about Anikuttan, a service mechanic who works from home. His day-to-day activities often have created an impression around him that he is mentally unstable. But ever since his father's suicide, owing to his sister's elopement with a man from an oppressed caste, his actions reveal the shades of insanities in him. He becomes indignant, and not only severs ties with his sister, but also enter into frequent fights with his neighbour Suni who too belongs to a lower caste. The crux of the film is all about how Anikuttan binds himself with Suni's newborn kid when both of them become the only survivors of a landslide that struck their area one night. Though the film could be categorized as a survival drama, the story at large portrays the transition of Anikuttan from a traumatized man who is tough on the surface to the man who brings out the hidden soft and emotional side of him at the time of crisis. His transformation has been diligently portrayed. [Ratheena \(2022\)](#)

The last one in the group is *Nna Thaan Case Kodu* (2022). Unlike the rest of the two male characters of the previously discussed movies, the hero in this film goes

straight away to the class of marginalized section of men. The hero Rajeevan, a thief whose life revolves around petty theft cases and hide and seek games with the cops, takes an unusual turn when he meets a woman with whom he starts living together. When the concept of a family becomes rooted in them, she demands Rajeevan to mend his ways and start to earn a livelihood. It becomes impossible for Rajeevan to have a normal life when he accidentally becomes part of a crime. The entire film is about Rajeevan's fight for legal justice and his struggles to prove his innocence before law. Rajeevan is neither sophisticated nor street-smart and worldly wise in any manner, and therefore his efforts to prove his honesty become all the more important in the plot of the movie. Cook and Bernink observes in *The Cinema Book* that modern-day film studies of masculinity concentrate less on the problems of fetishism and voyeurism, and more on the topics concerned with hysteria, trauma, and masochism [Cook & Bernink \(1999\)](#), 362. We may examine these films in the light of this statement.

2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- To analyse the trends in the representation of male characters in the recent Malayalam films.
- To study the extent to which films engage in the creation of gendered identities in society.
- To bring out the ideologies involved in masculine delineations in films at large.
- To emphasize the need for positive masculine depictions in movies.
- To show the relevance of normalizing real-life and layman portrayals in movies

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The primary texts for the research work are the Malayalam films – *Puzhu*, *Malayankunju* and *Nna Thaan Case Kodu*. The texts are analysed with emphasis on the main masculine characters in them. Given below are the reviews of some studies that have explored these texts from different perspectives.

[Karthika \(2022\)](#) studies the film *Puzhu* and *Malayankunju* for its theme of caste-based atrocities that operates at various levels in the domestic sphere and the complex subjugation of women outside and inside the family circle. The study also brings in some other Malayalam movies like *Manichithrathazhu* (1993) and *Bamboo boys* (2002) in order to show how Dalit characters were often used in the film to mock and evoke laughter. The researcher found that unlike these films, the main movies taken up for analysis represent Dalit characters as standing up for their existence and individuality. Gender perspective in the analysis mainly focussed on women; how women are made subservient both through their caste and gender identity.

[Namitha \(2021\)](#) studied the portrayal of masculinity in Malayalam cinema by comparing and contrasting male characters from two films – *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) and *Arkkariyam* (2021). The study found that both the films are different in showing masculinity and the attitude towards women. The comparative analysis showed that the former film depicts men in the usual light; as flag bearers of patriarchal values whereas the latter normalises the space of men in every spheres. The study also underlines the role of families in the creation of gender ideologies as seen in the films.

[Christina \(2021\)](#) explores the changes that happened in different masculine representations in Malayalam cinema over four decades. Her research based on Malayalam cinema over the years concluded that when it comes to representation, there were many categories that were excluded like lower caste men and other sexual categories like trans men. Her findings showed that it was in the 2010s that the discourse of toxic masculinity began to be represented in the films.

[Gangadharan \(2021\)](#) in his study of the Malayalam movie *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019) examines how masculine roles are subverted. The movie presents several male characters quite differently from the expected portrayals. His research found that all the male and female characters subverted their gender roles usually attributed to them by the film standards. Also, some characters share both feminine and masculine traits in them.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The review of literature reveals that the studies so far conducted concentrated on aspects of masculinity, evolution of masculine representations, comparison of masculine characters, and caste and gender-based issues. The present study aims to analyze the unnoticed shades in the portrayal of the main masculine characters in select films released recently. The study would enable us to comprehend the interplay between the material/cultural conditions and the human conduct – the ways in which they fit themselves into different categories of masculinity. And such attempts would call for further levels of incisive analysis in film studies.

5. METHODOLOGY

The present paper employs a descriptive and qualitative analysis. The content of the three films taken up for the study has been analysed paying attention to the points or junctures where the male protagonist exhibits more of his traits. Raewyn Connell's theory of masculinity has been taken for a proper perspective to look into the characters. In terms of Connell's categorization, the characters identified belongs to hegemonic, subordinate, and marginalized categories of masculinity. In addition to this the theoretical perspectives of Seidler and Sara Martin have been used wherever necessary.

6. DISCUSSION

Before proceeding to the analysis, let us see the chief elements that constitute masculinities. John Beynon in his seminal work *Masculinities and Culture* (2002) discusses the shaping factors of masculinities as gendered constructions. They are: "Historical location; Age and physique; Ethnicity; Religion and beliefs; Class and occupation; Education; Status and lifestyles; Culture and Subculture; Sexual orientation and Geographical factors". [Beynon \(2001\), p.10](#). As regards the demonstration and experience of masculinity, it can be seen that each male is placed to live through and exhibit masculinity in diverse ways depending on how he is socially and culturally situated. Along with this R.W Connell's seminal text on the essence and formation of masculine identity proclaims that there is not one masculinity, but many varied masculinities, each related with different positions of power. According to Connell's hierarchy of masculinities, there are hegemonic, subordinated, complicit and marginalized masculine categories. Hegemonic masculinity is such that it "guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" [Connell \(2005\), p.77](#).

Of the three films taken for study, the character of Kuttan belongs to the hegemonic masculine category. Kuttan legitimates patriarchy in every way possible, exercising his power and authority over the lives of his sister and his son. In Kuttan's case, he at times makes use of his institutional power, thus reinforcing his hegemonic position in utmost sense. His initial attempt was to separate his sister and her lover using his power and when failed, he takes their lives for good. Kuttan's bigotry and arrogance becomes the sole reason for his downfall and a disruption in the lives of his people. In another perspective, one could say that Kuttan is a toxic masculine figure whose actions were unreasonable in every angle. As Tillner opines, "the whole diversity of lived masculinities can be understood as specific realizations of a vague set of ideas and demands, images and stories that are defined as masculine, adapted to the concrete situation an individual or group has to cope with it" [Tillner \(2000\)](#), pp 49-59.

Connell's concept of subordinate masculinity was concentrated more on "the specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men" [Connell \(2005\)](#), p.78. When it comes to subordinate masculinity, though Connell's views were centred more on the oppression of homosexual men, he emphasizes the condition in which heterosexual men too get ousted from 'the circle of legitimacy'. Men from this category exhibit physical weakness and emotions like dejection. Anikuttan in *Malayankunju* behaves as someone who gives zero attention in maintaining a masculine image or conduct himself like 'what it means to be a man'. We see Anikuttan crying when he has an emotional breakdown, openly harassing his sister for the life she chose and picking up fights with the neighbour; both in the name of caste. The character of Anikuttan is portrayed as someone who does not involve in any sort of efforts to maintain a happy-go-lucky image. His behaviour reflects his mind, leaving no scope for further interpretation. When men like Anikuttan manifest qualities that are opposed to those that are valued in hegemonic masculinity, they come down to the lowest of the gender hierarchy of men. Here, a comparison between Anikuttan and Kuttan is very much instructive. Both of them had to go through almost similar life situations. But the way they react and deal with their life are different since both of them differ in their education, class, occupation, status and lifestyle. Social and financial status cemented the hegemonic power of Kuttan whereas the lack of it limited Anikuttan within his spaces. All these aspects appear to have influenced them as belonging to two different masculine categories, as gendered constructions.

Rajeevan, the hero of the film *Nna Thaan Case Kodu* (2022), unlike the other two characters previously analysed, is a mixture of both marginalized and subordinated masculine features. Being a thief, he does not have access to exercise hegemony in any manner but neither does he suppress his emotions. His perseverance to validate his innocence and his determination to stand for the just proves that despite his socio-economic and professional background, he can be the voice for bigger socio-political issues that exists in the society. The film being a court room drama, more or less throws light on the life of this reformed thief and his ability to bring more significant layers into the conflict. Rajeevan's character also seems to subtly suggest that one need not be in the top level of social hierarchy to bring in relevant changes in one's settings. As Martin argues the relevance of the depiction of masculinities in its varied forms is to "make men visible as men in major areas of culture and, most importantly, from a historicized point of view that denies any monolithic, universal view of gender across place and time". [Martín \(2020\)](#), p.8.

Film as a form of mass entertainment will continue to influence the construction of gendered identities in the society. But as Seidler points out, "Many of us felt ambiguous, even oppressed by the image of masculinity we were forced to

live up to" Seidler (2009), p.17. As far as a film is concerned, there exists a set of identifications for the spectator. It "involves both the recognition of self in the image on the screen, a narcissistic identification, and the identification of self with the various positions that are involved in the fictional narration: those of hero and heroine, villain, bit-part player, active and passive character". Ellis (2002), p.43.

7. CONCLUSION

Kuttan, Rajeevan and Anikuttan are characters that live among us, and the on-screen portrayal and subsequent acceptance gained by these characters emphasize the need for the concept of masculinity to be presented in all its depth. Considering the different aspects of characterization, and the reality or life experience portrayed, one could say that in the realm of gender delineations in films, one would always prefer to have real-life representation of lived realities, let alone any work of art. The analysis of these ordinary men points towards a greater reality, that it is normal to be ordinary. As these characters convey, it is not the level of physical strength and the capability of hiding one's emotions that make a man 'a man', but their social/cultural positioning as well as gendered constructions. Though not all the traits exhibited by these characters are appreciable, a fine balance of one's emotions with a tendency to develop a culture for positive /healthy masculinism is largely desirable.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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